

History of the Hungarian National Library

ISTVÁN MONOK



István Monok received his Doctorate from József Attila University, Szeged, in 1983, and was awarded the C.Sc. in Literary Sciences, by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1992. Having worked in the Central Library of József Attila University

and in Schools of Library Science, he was appointed Director General, National Széchényi Library in 1999. He has taught and published widely on the history of culture and the book and in 2000–2001 was Professor invité, École Pratiques des Hautes Études à la Sorbonne, Paris. He is currently President of the Committee of the History of European Civilization of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. He was made Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la République Française and Cavaliere dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana in 2004.

In examining the antecedents leading to the establishment of the national library it is important to note that no collection comparable to the libraries of the German Electors or the European rulers in its wealth, the freshness of the intellectual trends represented or its influence on the environment could have been formed in the region of the Carpathian Basin in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries. However, some members of the aristocratic families in Hungary could be compared in the breadth of their reading to their peers in Europe. It is also important to stress the fact that members of the aristocracy and prelacy

in Hungary were not able to shape their lifestyles or their collections merely to suit their own personal taste. The possibilities for buying books were very limited. There was no substantial production of books in Hungary; the book trade was hardly organized at all. We know of only a few merchants in Upper Hungary and Transylvania who also handled books but they aimed this activity mainly at commoners. If they attempted at all to establish regular contacts with aristocratic families in Hungary, the agents of foreign publishers (mainly in Vienna, Southern Germany and Northern Italy) were interested in selling books from their own publishing environment and they had no real competition. While students studying in Europe at the expense of different aristocratic families effectively added to the family library, their taste, studies and the nature of their reading inevitably influenced the patron's library. There was no real change in this situation until the second half of the eighteenth century and by the time of the Compromise of 1867 that established the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, a book trade had developed along lines similar to that already operating in the countries of Western Europe.

We do not know of any private library in the sixteenth or seventeenth century serving the function of representation which became widespread in the manor-houses and mansions of the eighteenth century. By the second half of the seventeenth century a change can be observed in the book collecting habits of the Hungarian aristocrats living in the environment of the imperial court in Vienna. Special mention must be made in this respect of the libraries of Ferenc Nádasdy (1623–71) in Pottendorff and of Pál Esterházy (1635–1713) in Kismarton and Fraknó.

The economic possibilities and scope for

{2007 note.}

HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

political action of the Kingdom of Hungary united under Habsburg rule were clearly determined by the fact that the country had been finally liberated from Turkish domination under the leadership of a foreign ruler. During the reigns of Charles II, Maria Theresa, Joseph II, Francis I and Ferdinand IV considerations of empire increasingly overrode Hungarian interests and the resulting tension eventually led to the outbreak of an armed struggle for independence in 1848–49. In the course of the eighteenth century the different nationalities living in the Carpathian Basin made increasing efforts to break away, developed their own cultural identities and consequently also their own cultural institutions (schools, libraries, printing houses). By the first half of the nineteenth century the cultural movements had become political movements and later, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries they began to demand and in part to lay the foundations of independence from Hungary and from the Habsburg Empire.

The most important feature of church history in the century following the expulsion of the Turks was that the Catholic Church, with the assistance of the State, rapidly regained its positions in all areas of ecclesiastical, economic, political and cultural life. The two archbishoprics (Kalocsa and Esztergom) first recovered their mediaeval bishoprics, then in the last third of the eighteenth century the new episcopal dioceses were formed and from 1804 the new archbishopric of Eger began to operate.

The nature of the attacks on the Protestant churches changed at the end of the seventeenth century. They were no longer exposed to direct religious persecution, but numerous obstacles were placed in their path. From the cultural viewpoint – including the history of libraries and reading – the most important factor was that the growth of the Protestant intelligentsia, primarily the clergy, was restricted. The Protestant aristocratic families had limited scope for action and their influence in politics and the economy declined. As a result they generally lacked sufficient financial resources to build up bibliophile collections.

Support for the Greek Catholic (Uniate)

Church and the Greek Orthodox Church became linked to the Habsburg policy on the nationalities, since most of the members of these congregations were Romanians and Serbs.

The episcopal and archiepiscopal libraries had always formed the backbone of the network of institutional collections. In the eighteenth century the older libraries – in Esztergom, Kalocsa, Pécs, Eger, Gyulafehérvár, Győr, Vác and Veszprém – strengthened and new libraries were established in Szombathely and Székesfehérvár. Library policy was shaped by renowned church leaders, most of whom came from Hungarian aristocratic families.

The library structure which still operates in Hungary today took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. After the expulsion of the Turks the different religious denominations set up libraries within their systems of cultural institutions and the secular organizations of society at first organized their own collections together with the church libraries. Collecting books became a new custom among persons of noble rank and especially the aristocracy. In general it can be said that reading culture and the history of books show a clearly perceivable change in book collecting and book reading habits around the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The different social strata in Hungary at that time and also the different geographical regions were not able to keep pace uniformly with the changes taking place in the countries of Western Europe. With the exception of some aristocratic families, their reading matter was either outdated or lagged behind the European book market. This phenomenon applied even more to the reading habits of the Hungarian-speaking townsfolk, the lesser nobility and gentry. The rise of the urban bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century led to the establishment of numerous institutions not tied to the churches (clubs, educational societies, reading circles, and so on).

With the reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II, the State also urged the creation of a system of culture and education less dependent on the churches and as a result the number of secular libraries also increased. The libraries of aristocrats and scholars were the most important for the

HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

development of book collecting in Hungary. Detailed descriptions and catalogues have come down to us from most of the aristocratic family libraries, a number of which later became public institutions. The most important were undoubtedly the Teleki library which also functioned as the central library of the Hungarians in Transylvania, established in 1802 by Sámuel Teleki (1739–1822), and the national library of the Transylvanian Saxons, established in 1803 by Sámuel Brukenthal (1721–1803) by transforming his private library into a public collection. One after the other the other big family libraries also became public institutions or were incorporated into such institutions. Among others, the library of Count József Teleki and his wife Kata Bethlen enriched the Calvinist College in Nagyenyed (1759), the collection of the Festetics family served the Georgicon (from 1797), József Teleki (1790–1855) established the library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1826) and the Ráday family library in Pécel went to the Calvinist Academy of Theology (1862).

Leading scholars in the eighteenth century were in a better position than their predecessors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The book trade was more organized and numerous attempts were made to form scholarly societies. These efforts finally culminated in the establishment of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in 1828. It is characteristic of the period that almost without exception the libraries of leading intellectuals eventually enriched one of the public libraries, from the first half of the nineteenth century the National Library or the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. This phenomenon confirms the sense of responsibility of these public figures and the conscious efforts they made for Hungary's cultural advancement.

The idea of establishing the Hungarian national library took shape together with the intention to set up the national scholarly society, an academy of sciences. In the absence of a national ruler these tasks were undertaken as a matter of course by Hungarian aristocratic families.



Figure 1: Count Ferenc Széchényi

Count Ferenc Széchényi (1754–1820) was born into one of the country's wealthiest families, whose estates were located mainly in the fertile regions of Western Hungary. Ferenc Széchényi consciously prepared for a political career. After his studies in the Theresianum in Vienna he went on a two-year tour of Europe, visiting Bohemia, the German principalities, Holland, England and Italy. After his return he set up his library in Sopronhórpács and in the mansion at Nagycenk. His librarians were József Hajnóczy (1750–95) and later Mihály Tíbolth (1765–1833). In 1802 he donated his library for the establishment of a national library (*Bibliotheca Regnicolaris*), obtaining authorization from the ruler on 26 November, 1802. Publication of the library's catalogue began in 1799, with supplementary volumes printed in 1803 and 1807. Even after the

HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

establishment the count continued to add to the collection so that at the time of his death the library comprised more than 20,000 documents, including 6,000 maps. Széchényi had a two-fold goal in sight: to collect all documents from authors in Hungary or containing information relevant to Hungary, and to provide scholars in Hungary with the reference works needed to study modern European intellectual trends. Other aristocrats and scholars followed the example of Ferenc Széchényi and donated a considerable number of books to the growing collection. Some of these deserve special mention.

István Illésházy, ancestor of Count István Illésházy (1762–1838) rose to the ranks of the Hungarian aristocracy in the sixteenth century. His library in the Trencsén castle inventoried in 1603 bears witness to his love of books. Since his opposition to the emperor led to his fall from favour and the confiscation of his assets, the family had to begin acquiring estates again. They were greatly assisted in this by their ties of kinship with the Thurzó family, as György Thurzó (1567–1616) was the Palatine of Hungary in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Illésházy family created its central court in Dubnic, Trencsén County and it was also here that they built up their library over generations. In 1792, one of the occasions when an inventory was taken in the library, it was found to contain 8,000 volumes. In 1835 István Illésházy decided to enrich the Hungarian National Library with this stock of books and donated the collection to the nation. This library incorporated into the Széchényi Library one of the most important collections formed in Hungary and built up continuously from the early seventeenth century (not bought at auction and not including larger legacies). The most noteworthy items had come to Dubnic from the library of the Palatine György Thurzó (1567–1616) already mentioned. Francesco Barbaro's *De re uxoria* (On Married Life), and the historical work by Pietro Ransano, written for Matthias Hunyadi but taken by the author to Naples after the king's death. After several owners in the sixteenth century, the Ransanus codex passed into the hands of György Thurzó and later of Gáspár Illésházy (1593–

1648). At the end of the eighteenth century it was acquired by Miklós Jankovich who sold his books to the National Library.

Already in the second half of the eighteenth century the father of Miklós Jankovich (1772–1846) had collected a substantial library in their house in Pest, but it was his son who even endangered the family's financial security in his single-minded pursuit of books, buying whole libraries from estates, especially if the former owner had shown an interest in Hungarian history. His first major purchase was the library of a historian, Carolus Wagner, a Pest professor. He then made purchases from the estates of doctors, lawyers, priests of different denominations and landowners. He strove to acquire rare publications and manuscripts, unpublished sources of Hungarian history or of interest for cultural history (such as Martin Luther's original last testament from the legacy of Benedict Carpzov). A number of Corvinas (manuscripts from the Corvina Library of King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary) also came into his possession. Besides the Ransanus codex acquired from the Illésházy library, these also included the biography of Alexander the Great by Curtius Rufus. As an obsessive collector he was also an obsessive bibliographer. He compiled a bibliography of books published in Hungary up to 1830, but this was not published. In 1824 he offered for sale to the National Library all the books he had collected up to then, for two-thirds of their value, but the purchase was not made until 1832. Miklós Jankovich's continuous purchases had exhausted the family's resources and it was only by selling the library that they were able to stave off disaster. However, the addiction again took hold and Jankovich began to collect another library, but he became bankrupt in 1844 and was placed under the charge of a guardian. He tried to sell his new collection to the National Library too, but eventually the family was forced to sell it in parts and in 1852 it was put up for public auction.

By that time the Széchényi National Library – as it was first officially named – was operating within the frame of the National Museum. The regulation on the National Museum adopted in

HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

1808 made it the Library of the National Museum and the two institutions had a joint history up to 1949. In 1846 the collection was moved into a fitting home, the building on Múzeum körút designed by Mihály Pollack. Beside the director of the Museum, the library was managed by a library custodian. The library custodians – later directors – were outstanding Hungarian scholars whose scholarly work was also related to the study of the collection. Ferdinánd Jakab Miller (1803–15), a legal expert, distinguished himself in organizing the operation of the library and in drafting the regulation on the National Museum. The historian István Horvát (1815–46) handled the first major purchases and under his direction the library also survived the Great Pest Flood of 1838. During the tenure of musicologist Gábor Mátray (1846–75) the holdings were arranged and set up in the new building, but the library did not receive readers from 1838 to 1866. The library's first special collection, the manuscript collection, was organized around 1860, and then from 1865 the early (fifteenth to seventeenth century) printings were also handled separately.



Figure 2: Special collections

Under the direction of the far-sighted minister of culture József Eötvös the library was made an important part of cultural policy, and its function expanded. Besides acquiring and preserving Hungarian-related documents great emphasis was placed on their scholarly processing and on research work. The new directors, Bishop Vilmos Fraknói, historian (1875–79), Béla Majláth, historian and archaeologist (1879–93), József Szinnyei, literary historian and bibliographer (1893–94) and László Fejérpataky, historian (1894–1919), achieved a considerable expansion of the library, opening it up to a wider public and intensifying the scholarly work. Fraknói launched *Magyar Könyvszemle* (Hungarian Book Review) (1876), one of the world's oldest journals on the history of books. Under his tenure Parliament finally made the National Museum a state-financed institution, a measure that has ensured a not abundant but reliable budget ever since. During his short term as director, Szinnyei organized the Newspaper Collection (1884) which now comprises more than 330,000 units and serves as an essential source for researchers studying openness in Hungarian culture, reflecting the state of culture and scholarship in all periods. In 1897, when Fejérpataky was director, the deposit copy system was introduced in Hungary, guaranteeing the possibility of access to materials printed in Hungary. In the last year of his directorship the collection of early Hungarian books of Gyula Todoreszku and his wife, Aranka Horváth, the most important contemporary private library of its kind, passed into the possession of the library as a gift.

The next major gift, Sándor Apponyi's collection of foreign Hungarica – which is still one of the most important special collections – was made to the national library (1925) when the director was Imre Lukinich (1924–29). In the previous year, 1924, the separate Music Collection was organized. In 1929 the regulation governing the provision of deposit copies was amended and so under the direction of Emil Jakubovich, language historian (1929–34) and József Fitz, book historian (1934–45) the library could begin to develop a more systematic acquisitions policy. One of the organizational

HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

consequences was the organization of the Collection of Small Prints (1935) and then the Map Collection (1939) as separate units. The processing of documents was also brought into line with international standards and the library became capable of providing regular and systematic modern library services.

The National Széchényi Library became an independent institution in 1949 and its tasks also expanded considerably. As a result of the numerous amendments to the deposit copy regulations, the core collection of books, which comprises books published from 1601 (after 1712 in the case of books published in Hungary), grew dynamically. This was helped by the many donations and the planned purchase of legacies. The libraries of János Batsányi, Sándor Kisfaludy, Lajos Kossuth, Imre Madách or Miklós Zsirai as collections are important documents of outstanding life achievements and of the general culture of Hungarian intellectuals in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Today the core collection consists of 2.5 million books.

In 1949 the Collection of Theatre History was organized and the systematic protection of holdings began in 1952. The Collection of Microfilms created at that time now comprises more than 100 million films, giving readers access to documents now protected in their original form. Independent restoration activity began in 1964 and the Hungarian national library now has one of the world's best teams of restorers.

The Collection of Historical Interviews was formed in 1985. It systematically produces and collects documentary films and television news films in Hungary and of Hungarian relevance. The life career interviews conducted with leading figures in Hungarian cultural, scientific, political and economic fields are of inestimable value as historical sources and are becoming increasingly important for historical research. This division also collects and processes films (video cassettes) issued.

The library's youngest collection was formed in 2000, the Collection of Contemporary Photography, which also offers the possibility of forming a uniform collection of photography.

From 1953 a new series of the Hungarian National Bibliography was launched. The modern bibliographies have appeared continuously since then. The national library is the chief organizer and starting point of the system of information and document provision set up in Hungary in the last 50 years. It devotes special attention to locating documents of Hungarian relevance originating outside Hungary, to their bibliographic listing and naturally also to their acquisition.

After the nationalization of the libraries of the churches and aristocracy (1949–52), the Gyöngyös Franciscan library, the Zirc Cistercian library and the Keszthely Helikon library were carefully preserved by the national library and have now been returned to their original owners.

In 1952 a Library Science and Methodology Centre was formed within the library; it now operates, with changed functions, as the Library Institute (2000). The Institute's Special Library for Library Sciences is one of the biggest library science and library policy collections in Europe and serves as a background for the professional work of the Institute in assisting the library network in Hungary.

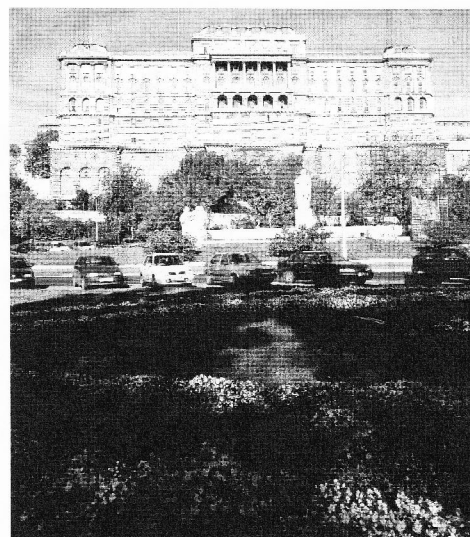


Figure 3: The National Széchényi Library

HISTORY OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL LIBRARY

The National Széchényi Library occupied its present place in the Buda Castle Palace in 1985, but its collections have now outgrown this place too. The development of informatics, begun in the 1970s and accelerated in the 1990s, has not eased the storage problems either. The national bibliographic records and the library's catalogues are now largely accessible online. In 1999 the Hungarian Electronic Library which makes works of Hungarian literature and non-fiction available on the Internet, was also transferred to the national library. From 2002 the national library also hosts the joint cataloguing programme of libraries in Hungary.

The national library is an active member of the international library community. In addition to its membership of professional bodies it makes great efforts to ensure its presence as an institution in

international forums dealing with research on the history of books and libraries.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Báttonyi, Viola. *The National Széchényi Library* (Budapest, 1999) ISBN 963 200 405 1.
 Jóború, Dr Magda, ed., *The National Széchényi Library* (Budapest, 1976) ISBN 963 200 006 4.
 Monok, István, ed., *Bulletin of the National Széchényi Library* (Budapest, 2002–) ISSN 1589 004X.
 Monok, István, *Treasures of the National Széchényi Library* (Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2002) ISBN: 963 547 665 5.
 Németh, Dr Mária, ed., *The National Széchényi Library* (Budapest, 1985) ISBN 963 200 021 8.

ABSTRACT

The library structure which still operates in Hungary today took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The secular organizations of society at first organized their own collections together with the church libraries. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the rise of the urban bourgeoisie led to the establishment of numerous institutions not tied to the churches (clubs, educational societies, reading circles, and so on). The libraries of aristocrats (for example the library of Count József Teleki and his wife Kata Bethlen, the Festetics family, and the Ráday family) and scholars were the most important for the development of book collecting in Hungary.

The idea of establishing the Hungarian national library emerged together with the intention to set up the national scholarly society, an academy of sciences. The collection is based on the library of Count Ferenc Széchényi donated for the establishment of a national library. It was first called Széchényi National Library, and operated within the frame of the National Museum up to 1949. Under the direction of the far-sighted minister of culture József Eötvös the library was made an important part of cultural policy, and its function expanded. Besides acquiring and preserving Hungarian-related documents great emphasis was placed on their scholarly processing and on research work.

The National Széchényi Library became an independent institution in 1949 and occupied its present place in the Buda Castle Palace in 1985. The national library is an active member of the international library community, making great efforts to ensure its presence as an institution in international forums dealing with research on the history of books and libraries.